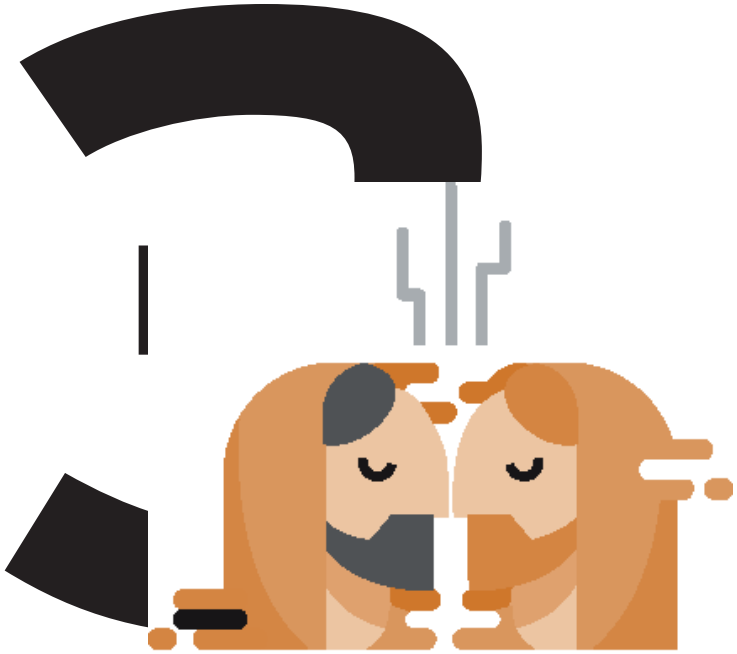


Unit .34

Session .03

Breaking Down Barriers

Scripture

Ephesians 2:1-10, 14-16

1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins **2** in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient. **3** We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also. **4** But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, **5** made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! **6** He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, **7** so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. **8** For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift— **9** not from works, so that no one can boast. **10** For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do ... **14** For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In his flesh, **15** he made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations, so that he might create in himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace. **16** He did this so that he might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by which he put the hostility to death.

Intro Options

Main Point:
Jesus unites us to God and to one another through the gospel.

Remember, this icon means there is a Leader Pack item that goes with the lesson. See Leader Pack for additional instructions.

Option 1

Individually or in groups, students should imagine they have a friend who has just been put in charge of a new group. It could be a new professional sports team in a new city; it could be a new musical band; it could be a start-up business. Their job is to create a "Beginner's Guide to Team-Building" that they will then give to this new leader. They can make a brochure or a list or a comic strip to present, but it should be something the new leader can physically take.

Give them some time to prepare their guides and then let them share them. In today's session, we'll see how the Lord has united us in Christ as one church. Let's see how our list compares to how Jesus unites us.

Option 2

Your students should pretend they run a comedy sketch club (something like Saturday Night Live, but maybe call it Sunday Morning Live or Wednesday Night Live). In small groups, they should create "informercials" to educate their viewers on how to bring people together. In each infomercial, they should give a few bad ways to bring people together and a few good ways to bring people together. The goal is to be funny; so for instance, one bad way to bring people together could be to release a mad bull into the school hallway so that everyone is "brought together" by running from the bull. A good way to bring people together might be to provide a free pizza food truck for them.

Let them prepare and share their skits—have fun! Talk about bad things that bring people together in real life and some good things—especially Christian things—that bring people together in real life. In today's session, we'll see how we were all brought together in the worst way possible: as sinners. We'll also see how we can be brought together in the best way possible: in Jesus Christ's church.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Ephesians 2:1-13.

To feel the gravity and wonder of what Christ has done to save us, we must first come face-to-face with our condition apart from Him. It's hard to sense the beauty of the phrase, "But God, who is rich in mercy" (2:4), if we have not yet reckoned with just how lost and hopeless we were in our sins. Indeed, mercy cannot even be sensed as such until you realize what your sins truly deserve. So, Paul opens Ephesians 2 with a humbling reminder of our natural condition—dead, disobedient, worldly, and under wrath.

- **Which description in these verses stand out to you the most? Why?**

Paul offers a vivid description of life apart from Christ, but perhaps none more jolting than the words "dead" and "under wrath." Without Christ, we aren't merely sick or bad. We are spiritually dead. God is the source of life, and to be separated from Him makes us dead. Despite Satan's deceptive claims to the contrary, sin is death. Not only are we dead in our sin, but our sins also put us in opposition to God. We are under his judgment apart from Christ. As John 3:18 says, "…anyone who does not believe is already condemned."

- **How can God use these verses to keep us from being self-righteous when comparing ourselves with both unbelievers and other Christians?**

The gospel is humbling. When we realize just how lost we are on our own, it pulls the carpet out from under spiritual pride. There is no ground for boasting or for looking down on others. Paul plainly says that we were just like the world in our sins (v. 3). This aspect of the gospel message is essential to having a gracious spirit toward others. When we are prideful, harsh, and judgmental, we show that we have failed to remember that we aren't any better than anyone else apart from God's grace.

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 24, DDG)

79. Body of Christ

The New Testament describes the church as the body of Christ. The church lives and operates as Christ's representative here on earth, with Christ as its head (Col. 1:18). This means that the church is an extension of Christ's ministry, carrying out His work by fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). In addition, the picture of the church as the body of Christ shows us the interconnectedness of individual Christians, with each member dependent upon one another for growth and sanctification (1 Cor. 12).

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
Jesus unites us to God and to one another through the gospel.

Ephesians 2:1-3

"These were your grave clothes. You were wrapped up in them. Nay, this was your sarcophagus. You were shut up in it, as in a great stone coffin: Dead in trespasses and sins…What a dreadful thing it is — a man dead to all that is good, but alive through the indwelling of the devil that is within him. The spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience."[1]

"Paul describes their pre-Christian past (vv. 1-2) in terms of their being dead in trespasses and sins. Before God had made them alive with Christ, they were deeply affected by evil, determining influences. These included their environment (the ways of this world, v. 2), an inner inclination towards evil (the cravings of our sinful nature, v. 3), and supernaturally powerful opponent (the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at working those who are disobedient, v. 2). Like the rest of humanity outside of Christ, they were out of fellowship with God; for they were by nature objects of wrath (v. 3)."[2]

Activity

Break your students into three groups. Give each group three sheets of paper. On the first sheet, each group should write "barriers" and compile a short list of possible barriers to unity in the church: what kinds of things keep us (or tear us) apart?

On the second sheet, write, "breakdown," along with ideas of how Jesus breaks down the barriers on the first sheet. For example, if gossip is a barrier on the first sheet, on the second sheet, a break-down of gossip is that the Lord forbids it.

On the third sheet, write "building." On this list, they should compose how Jesus builds us back together after breaking down the barriers. For example, if gossip was a barrier, and Jesus' command breaks it down, then he builds us back up by helping us find our happiness in him rather than in having other people's attention.

1. *Charles Spurgeon, "Ephesians 2 Commentary - Spurgeon's Verse Expositions of the Bible," StudyLight.org, 2011, https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/spe/ephesians-2.html.*
2. *Peter T. O'Brien, The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to Ephesians (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009)*
3. *Kevin DeYoung, "10 Reasons Racism Is Offensive to God," The Gospel Coalition, June 25, 2015, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/10-reasons-racism-is-offensive-to-god/.*

In Defense (p. 26, DDG)

Christianity offers the greatest foundation upon which to build arguments for equality, justice, and reconciliation. Christianity can account for the source of our equality (the image of God), the source of injustice (the fall), and the source of reconciliation (the gospel). Kevin DeYoung wrote, "If we who have been made in the same image, born into the world with the same problem, find the same redemption through the same faith in the same Lord, how can we not draw near to each other…Antagonism toward people of another color, language, or ethnic background is antagonism toward God himself and his design for eternity. Christians ought to reject racism, and do what they can to expose it and bring the gospel to bear upon it."[3] The moral underpinnings of every cry for equality and justice finds their roots in the Christian Scriptures. Our culture's acute awareness of these issues gives us a unique opportunity to testify to the truthfulness of the gospel.

TEACHING PLAN

How can a dead man bring himself to life? How can a sinner save himself from the wrath of God? There's nothing we can do to save ourselves—we are hopeless. But while we were dead in sin, God loved us. In mercy, He withheld the judgment we deserved. But He did more than withhold wrath; God saved us by His grace and seated us with Christ!

- **What does the gospel teach us about God?**

The gospel reveals God's character more clearly than anywhere else. On one hand, we see His justice and righteousness. He does not sweep sin under the rug, but exercises holy wrath. And yet, in the gospel, we find a God whose heart holds more mercy than the oceans hold water. We are met by a God whose love cannot be measured and whose grace and kindness are greater than we could have ever hoped for. And to think that in the ages to come, there is yet more grace to be found in Him. This inspires praise like King David penned: "This is why you are great, Lord God. There is no one like you, and there is no God besides you, as all we have heard confirms" (2 Sam. 7:22).

- **What does verse 10 teach us about works and the gospel?**

This passage is clear that we are not saved by works. With each phrase, the emphasis on grace is compounded until it climaxes in verses 8 and 9 with the words, "For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift— not from works, so that no one can boast." But even if works are not the foundation of our salvation, their importance should not be quickly dismissed. The gospel recreates us in Christ so that we no longer walk "according to the ways of this world" (2:1), but according to the ways of the kingdom of heaven. Works are empowered by grace, not contrary to grace. Indeed, Paul himself said it was God's grace that made him work harder (1 Cor. 15:10) and that grace teaches us to renounce sin and live a godly life (Titus 2:12).

Read Ephesians 2:14-16

The gospel brings peace with God, but it also makes peace with others possible. God reconciles us to Himself and then to each other; He makes us new and then makes our relationships new, too. God dismantled the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, creating one people in Christ. Much like Israel was composed of twelve tribes, so now God's people are one nation from every tribe and race.

- **How should these verses affect the way we view and feel toward Christians of different ethnicities and backgrounds?**

In Christ, what unites us is greater than what divides us. By making us one, Jesus gives us a new identity. Enemies are now brothers; opponents are now co-heirs; dissimilar people are now one body. While we maintain the beauty and dignity of our differences, those differences no longer define our relationships. Now, our differences complement one another in order to display the power and love of God.

- **If peace with God took sacrifice and grace, what will it take for us to have peace with each other?**

Peace with God was secured by God's sacrificial love and mercy. If Christians are going to be united, we must imitate our Savior. We have to die to self and lay aside our preferences. We have to be ready to give and receive mercy. God's kindness must be the basis of our relationships with one another as followers of Jesus.

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
Jesus unites us to God and to one another through the gospel.

Ephesians 2:4-10

"We have this for a foundation truth, that there is more mercy in Christ than sin in us."[4]

"We are not only raised from the dead with Christ, but we are spiritually raised into the heavenly places with him. It is a great thing when a man learns to look up from earth to heaven. It is a greater thing when he learns to look down from heaven upon earth — to have you sitting at the right hand of God, and then to look down on all the things of this present life as far below you."[5]

"Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning."[6]

Ephesians 2:14-16

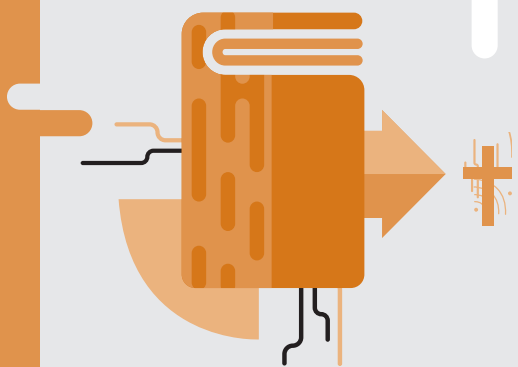
"This paragraph provides one of the most wonderful descriptions of peace and reconciliation within the Pauline letters. Here, both the horizontal and vertical dimensions to this central salvation blessing are treated within the framework of God's saving plan. Further, the centerpiece of this comprehensive reconciliation, and the fundamental, theological undergirding of the whole letter, is to be found in vv. 14-18, where believers 'come near' to God and to one another (Gentiles and Jews) through the saving death of the Lord Jesus Christ."[7]

"We love Christ-exalting diversity not because it is a cool social issue, but because it is a costly blood issue. We love Christ-exalting ethnic diversity because we love the gospel…Christ alone, through the gospel of Christ-crucified and risen, can give you the staying power to press on through great obstacles toward the advancement of Christ-exalting racial diversity. He died for this. And so his death holds the key to pressing on for this."[8]

4. Richard Sibbes, The Bruised Reed (Banner of Truth, 1998).
5. Charles Spurgeon, "Ephesians 2 Commentary - Spurgeon's Verse Expositions of the Bible," StudyLight.org, 2011, https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/spe/ephesians-2.html.
6. Dallas Willard, The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2014).
7. Peter T. O'Brien, The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to Ephesians (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).
8. John Piper, "From Bloodlines to Bloodline," Desiring God, January 14, 2012, https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/from-bloodlines-to-bloodline.

(p. 25, DDG) Christ Connection

The gospel breaks down barriers and unites those who have trusted in Jesus for salvation by grace through faith. Jesus has reconciled all who believe into one body—the church.



LESSON 102: COOPERATION
BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Ephesians 2:1-10, 14-16

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Jesus unites us to God and to one another through the gospel.

JESUS CONNECTION

The gospel breaks down barriers and unites those who have trusted in Jesus for salvation by grace through faith. Jesus has reconciled all who believe into one body—the church.

LIFEWISE QUALITY

COOPERATION – Choosing to work with others toward a goal.

HEAD

How does Paul describe each of us before we turn to Jesus in faith? How are we changed after we repent of our sin and believe the good news of Jesus?

Why has God chosen to accept and save us from sin through faith alone instead of saving us because of good works?

HEART

No one deserves salvation or can earn it. How should this fact affect how we compare ourselves with others, whether they believe in Jesus or not?

Even people who believe in Jesus disagree sometimes. How does knowing Jesus give us a foundation that allows us to cooperate with other believers' help, even if we don't always agree with them?

HANDS

Cooperation requires finding common ground. Jesus is the very best common ground ("He Himself is our peace" who "tore down the dividing wall of hostility"), but we can use any similarity as a starting point. Think of someone in a class or group or on a team with you with whom you do not get along. Is that conflict hurting the group's ability to work well? Try to find some common ground with that person. Write down three things you have in common. Make a point of trying to connect with that person this week by starting a conversation about that connection.